

SILLY CEREMONIES. A performance by the Kipper Kids, presented at the Kitchen. (Closed)

# A Farewell to Alarm

By Kay Larson

When I saw the Kipper Kids at the Kitchen last year, I thought they were funnier than anybody, with the possible exception of Steve Martin. This year they were still funny, but seemed to have lost an edge. They're calmer, as though a certain desperation had gone, a Mack-the-knife sort of meanness with the tone of a barroom brawl. I had been disturbed by it, but the threat of violence had drawn me like mere humor can't.

The Kippers are the Evel Knievels of performance art. In contrast to the unctuousness of Bob and Bob, two L.A. artists whose persona is to look like Dick Clark and sing like your kid brother, the Kippers cultivate a fraternity-drag-show style presented with the seriousness of kamikaze pilots. It's tasteless to accuse them of bad taste. They transcend what I'll call "frat-falls" by pushing outrageousness to its limits, over the cliff and into the void. One of their funniest bits last year was a mock castration: they suspended pickles from strings around their necks, pulled out their cocks, held up the pickles, twinkled their ukeleles, sang "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend . . . oom"—and bit off the end of the pickle.

Mild-mannered superman types, the Kippers keep up dual identities—one is a commodities trader, the other a carpenter and former researcher for the London *Daily Express*. Harry and Harry met some years ago, linked forces, and had the distinction of being thrown out of the most progressive theatre school in England. In

Canada this year a Winnipeg paper called them "sexual deviants," a funny comment when you consider that performance art itself is deviant—the one art form that can mimic social behaviors and mock them at the same time.

The Kippers and their ceremonies belong to a branch of performance art that bears almost no resemblance to the civilized modern bourgeois theatre—that instead invokes primitive shamanistic proto-theatrics. Watching the Kippers I thought of the Kwakiutl Indians. Their shamans are called Fool Dancers—clowns, armed with clubs and stones, who attack anything they consider too beautiful. They fling snot at one another and deposit turds in neighbors' houses. By raising anarchic demonry, their madness becomes a social mirror, and their power of exorcism grows.

The Kippers don't think of themselves as humorists. Having set mayhem in motion, they perform their roles with utter seriousness. Not everyone realizes how serious they are. The Kippers used to end their show with a boxing match. Every night for a month one would punch out the other; at the climax they'd be streaming blood, and know the social system demands sacrifices of its artists (though most make do with poverty and bad housing). Does blood mean the madness has "gone too far"? What does that phrase really mean? The Kippers rely on going too far—or the threat of it—to perform an exorcism by anger.

The Kippers' pugnacious reputation has spread through Europe in advance of their growing performance following. They have appeared at the 1972 Munich Olympics, as sideshows of a Rolling Stones concert in Covent Garden, at the Whiskey A Go Go in Los Angeles, and even on *The Gong Show*. But they're remembered for the story of their bash through the Munich beer halls (they lobbed tomatoes until attacked by goons) and the now-famous incident in the house of Austrian performance artist Hermann Nitsch. Invited to dinner, they began to pour food over their heads until Nitsch and his wife were

doubled over with laughter.

Harry Kipper played a role in Nitsch's *Orgies, Mysteries, Theatre* when it visited Santa Monica last year—an all-night Nietzschean/Dionysian immersion in crucifixions, blood, and gutted animal carcasses, accompanied by the wail of trumpets. Harry calls the experience "incredibly intense," which is no doubt an understatement. Nitsch is a morally troubling example of the notorious Austrian "suicide cult"—the sado-maso extreme of body art—which cultivates the cathartic power of released violence. The Kippers belong on the same continuum, though they differ in degree. Chris Burden belongs here, too; his crucifixion on a

Volkswagen, his crawl over broken glass on a Los Angeles street, his entombment in a locker at the University of California for seven days are incidents that have grown into art-world legends.

When the Kippers played the Berkeley Art Museum recently, a group of students decided to test the Kippers' predilection for violence by lobbing eggs from the audience in the middle of the performance. When one hit Harry on the chin, he charged off the stage and punched the kid. The Kippers say they've decided to tickle their antagonists the next time around. I'd have hated to be there when the kid got punched—but I'm secretly disappointed that he won't get punched again. ■

## Approaching Las Vegas

By J. Hoberman

Art-world entertainment à la Kipper Kids is Neanderthal commedia dell'arte. Their shtick is primal but light—the warm-up act for a Pleistocene Hermann Nitsch. Could they make it on *Saturday Night Live*? Here are two beefy Britons with perforated plaster chins, Pinocchio noses, and painted-on Hitler mustaches. They're wearing shower caps, jock-straps, and T-shirts that bulge with a sort of udderlike formation. Opening with aggressively garbled versions of "Let's Twist Again" or "My Blue Heaven" they accompany themselves on distasteful plastic guitar, superbly bleating clarinet, and an extensive repertoire of simulated farts. As the evening regresses they exhibit mock colostomies, indulge in a controlled form of food fighting, and build up to an explosive masturbation finale.

At heart, the Kippers are parodists of male-bonding: Playing to each other rather than the audience, they shift from cooperation to antagonism with Laurel and Hardy deftness. The boys flutter their fingers, jiggle their udders, give forth taunting raspberries of baboonish trucu-

lence. *Silly Ceremonies*'s most electrifying moment came when, circling each other like Sumo wrestlers and whistling "Tonight, Tonight," they produced identical bottles of Thunderbird, smashed them, and stabbed each others' udders to shpritz the stage with paint.

And that's why the Kippers wouldn't work on TV. The act requires a back-bent of menace—the possibility that they'll run amuck, that the audience might have to pay for vicariously enjoying the spectacle of two grown men dowsing each other with eggs, baked beans, and blue ink. At one point, flour-filled balloons rigged on pulleys began whizzing stageward from overhead while the Kippers lunged for them with nail-studded pingpong rackets. Ideally you would have had an audience uneasily shifting seats, perhaps edging for the door. But by then it was evident that the Kippers, who had respected the proscenium all evening meant us no harm. The Sword of Damocles was withdrawn before it even became a threat: Has California mellowed them? Are they holding out for Vegas? ■